Courage and Strength

Meriko

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This story was first published on February 11th, 2002, and was last updated on September 5th, 2002.

FicLab ID: Lrlw8kcc/lor2z3tt/50000E5S

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Summary

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title	Courage and Strength
author	Meriko
source	https://www.fanfiction.net/s/597773/
published	February 11th, 2002
updated	September 5th, 2002
words	22,801
chapters	6
status	Complete
rating	Fiction K
tags	Complete, Fanfiction, Final Fantasy IX, Games, Romance/Adventure

Description:

Sequel to Duty and Honor. Freya and Fratley search for a replacement jewel for the Wind Harp. Status: Complete.

1. Cleyra

Courage and Strength — Part I: Cleyra

Freya stood by the inner gates to Cleyra, scanning the cobblestone paths around her with careful eyes, but otherwise quite still. It was near stardawn, when daylight was a half a world away and the moon had yet to raise her glowing face above the horizon, and only a few lamps hung at odd intervals in the streets to light the winding paths. During the past three years, she had spent nearly all of her time in the kingseat of Burmecia, only coming to Cleyra when summoned by the King, and even then, simply staying for a few hours before departing once more. The hushed stillness of night, high in the treetops of this lofty city, was so old as to be new to her, and Freya kept even her breathing quiet, that she might not disturb the peace that had settled itself over the city.

As a sudden breeze whipped through Cleyra, rustling leaves and setting the lamps to bobbing and swinging on their chains, Freya raised a hand to tug her hat more securely onto her head. With her customary crimson uniform ruined by her brief

battle with Sir Fratley, as well as the promise of a long journey ahead, Freya had changed into her simpler traveling attire. Rather than a Dragoon's eye-catching formal uniform, she was now dressed in three varying shades of dusty blue, layered over her body in the form of a loose shirt, fitted vest, pants, and of course the hat. Over this outfit, she wore a long, sleeveless tunic which had a cloak attached at the shoulders. She had created this flowing, coat-like garment for herself one day, and had then been pressed to make a great many more like it for friends and fellow Dragoons, the unique article being found useful as well as attractive and comfortable.

The cloak was attached to the tunic with some simple buttons, and could be removed when the weather was warm, or for use as a blanket, sling, or even an emergency tent. Long hours spent rubbing tallow into the thin leather had given the material the double advantage of being impervious to both rain and sharp winds, and if one fastened the front of the cloak securely, one could stay quite dry and comfortable even in the thickest rain, ice, or sandstorm. The tunic was loose and light, and so could be worn even during the hottest days, and had the additional virtue of being able to transform quite

easily into a backpack. The sides and lower hem were adorned with neat holes, and by threading a leather thong through them and pulling it tight, a roomy pack was created, with the arm holes now serving as shoulder straps. Various pockets and loops scattered about the tunic increased its usefulness, and all in all, Freya was quite proud of her skills with needle and thread.

For now, the unique transforming feature of the tunic was unnecessary, as Freya carried over one shoulder a small pack already, with whatever items she deemed necessary for a journey tucked carefully away into its myriad pockets and pouches. And in her right hand, she held a simple, lightweight lance. She had a great many heavier, more powerful lances, but for fighting one's way across who knew what continent, a lighter, faster weapon would stand one in far better stead. Besides, it was the one Sir Fratley had left in her care yesterday, and she was loathe to give it up for any other.

She had still made a visit to the weapons smith, however, for an extra set of daggers. Early in her novitiate, Sir Fratley had impressed upon her that he expected any Dragoon traveling with him to carry not the usual one or two daggers, but no less than four. To always carry one dagger was required, two

was standard, three was cautious… four was Sir Fratley. Although he would not remember instilling this precautionary measure into her, still Freya felt some satisfaction at having remembered his long-ago teachings. Freya squirmed slightly, wanting suddenly to confirm that she had indeed remembered all four blades. She knocked against the dagger at her waist with one elbow, arched her back slightly to feel the one tucked into her belt dig into her spine, and pressed her left forearm to her side in order to feel the dagger strapped to her arm. Then, she glanced down slightly and wriggled her right foot in its boot until she ascertained that there was indeed a fourth dagger snug inside.

"Is there a stone in your boot, Lady Freya?"

Freya stilled her foot and closed her eyes resignedly. Of course. She'd been waiting patiently for half an hour, and the moment she started wriggling around like a Novice who had too much tea before a long ceremony, Sir Fratley arrived. She opened her eyes and looked up to find the knight looking at her now-calm foot with polite concern.

"Good morning, Sir Fratley," she greeted him, and then explained, "I was making sure I had not forgotten the dagger I keep in my boot."

“Ah,” he intoned, and then swept back his cloak to reveal three daggers of his own secured on his belt. Taking two of the weapons and their plain leather sheaths, he held them out to Freya and instructed, “Keep these two upon your person as well. I see that you have another dagger at your belt, and that is well, but I do not travel with any less than four knives at hand, and I suggest that you do the same.”

She held out her hands and took the two daggers, balancing them in her palms experimentally. “The longer the journey, the plainer your fare. And the more uncertain the path, the more varied your wear,” said Freya, in a sort of sing-song manner, as if she were recalling a long-learned verse. “Arm lightly but well, keep one dagger more than the usual last resort, and you shall have done all that needs doing aside from leaving.”

Fratley nodded to her in reply, as if uncertain what to make of her brief recital. Freya smiled, and after tucking one of his daggers into her other boot, she handed the other back to him, adding, “And in company, burdens shall be shared equally regardless of rank and age. Take one dagger back, Sir Fratley, and we shall both carry five.”

The dagger was taken after a short, surprised pause, and fastened back onto the belt, and the older Dragoon said, “I should have guessed that my habits would have been impressed upon you. Is there anything else about you that reflects my mentoring?”

Freya cast about her mind, but could not think of anything off hand, and told him so.

He shrugged and replied, “It is mere curiosity, and of no importance. I suspect I shall see traces of myself in you as we travel, in any case.” Glancing at her outfit, he noted, “The journey will be a long one, and I did not give you much time to make ready. Are you prepared?”

Freya nodded and replied, “I have everything I need.” And though she had only her lance and a small pack on her back in addition to the clothes she wore, it was true that she needed nothing more in order to start this journey. Sir Fratley had sent her a brief note last night by way of a very sleepy Novice, which gave her a better idea of their goals.

“Some while back, one of our scholars departed Cleyra, in order to journey across the ocean to Daguerro, there to search for ancient texts and maps in order to try and discover the original source of

the gem which gave such power to the Wind Harp. He found but little, yet it was enough to be encouraging. However, that same scholar was lost on the return voyage, and now the king bids me to begin the search anew, and to also return with a new gemstone, should such a one truly exist. Passage has been secured for us until Daguerro, and there we shall search for directions to our next destination."

The trip to Daguerro could be taken in ease, first by taking a boat to Alexandria, and then by booking a passenger's berth on one of the merchant airships bound to Lindblum, where Regent Cid kindly promised them use of one of his newest airships to shuttle them over to the remote mountaintop of Daguerro. Along the way and at their initial destination, there would be inns and shops enough that the two Knights need bring nothing with them except for their purses.

Hopefully, what they found in the massive archives at Daguerro would send them out again after a magical jewel, but who knew where it would be? Their journey might take a month, or then again, it might take ten years. But Freya had her training as a Dragoon Knight, years of practical experience in traveling far from civilization, a sturdy lance, a store of useful spells, some emergency rations and

medicines, and most wonderful of all, Sir Fratley's companionship.

Considering the daunting task that they had before them, Freya was in a startlingly cheerful mood.

Her traveling companion nodded in satisfaction, and then inclined his head toward the stairs leading down to the main gates of Cleyra. "Let us depart, then," he said, and, after waiting one moment for Freya to fall in step with him, led the way out of the tree city, and on to their Journey.

2. Lindblum to Daguerro

Courage and Strength — Part II: Lindblum to Daguerro

Freya leaned over the railing of the airship as far as she dared, peering out and about her at the clouds and bright, glittering ocean beneath. As of yet, there was nothing else to be seen, but for the occasional flash of white feathers or silvery scales, glimpsed upon the ocean surface for a brief moment, and then quickly lost in the speed of travel. Silver hair, kept at a servicable shoulder-length, fluttered around her head like small banners and streamers as she strode up the deck to the very forefront of the ship, looking yearningly at the horizon as if for a glimpse of the shore, and the mountains of Daguerro. There was nothing to be seen, of course, for they were about a half day's journey away, by her calculation of the hours. Closing her eyes to forestall any more vain searching, Freya consciously forced herself to relax, and to enjoy this respite from their travels.

There was no great haste in their Journey, as no known evil threatened Cleyra or Burmecia as a whole, and yet it would be sheer idleness to travel at

a leisurely pace, as if they were merely traveling for pleasure. And so Sir Fratley and Lady Freya had set for themselves a rigorous pace whenever they traveled by foot. Until now, their travels had been exceedingly easy, as much of the miles had been accomplished by boat or airship. However, every time the two Dragoons found themselves on board a vessel, Freya had to consciously remind herself to take advantage of the forced rest, rather than spend all her time roaming the ship in restlessness. Their search and stay at Daguerro would pose no dangers nor strain, of course… however, the road that led from Daguerro could lead them anywhere, and into any danger. She ought to be grateful for even her boredom, for there would likely be little of it later on.

She breathed deep, reveling for the moment in the crisp, biting salt wind, so different from the mild breezes and hot desert air that swirled around Cleyra, or the chilled, rain-lashed gusts and occassional oppressive humidity of the kingseat of Burmecia. As she turned her head this way and that, letting the swift wind whip her hair all about her, she sniffed at the air, filling her lungs over and over again, as if to try and saturate her senses with the tangy scent. Some small shift in the air that blew

about her gave her pause, and she instinctively knew what would greet her sight when she opened her eyes to see who was standing next to her, blocking the wind.

Still with her eyes closed, she sighed and said in a voice both resigned and amused, “Good afternoon, Sir Fratley.”

Lifting her lids at last, she turned her head to find him gazing at her with a bit of surprise. “How did you know it was I?” the Dragoon asked.

With a rueful smile, Freya replied, “You always appear whenever I am doing something… odd.”

Fratley gave her a grave nod, and replied with the utmost seriousness, “Such as shaking your head to no one in particular, and scenting the ocean breeze as if it were the warm air from a baker’s kitchen.” Then, with a lighter expression, but with as much gravity as ever, he observed, “Whenever you and I are apart, and I come upon you once more, you do seem…”

“To have taken leave of my senses?” supplied Freya.

“…unguarded,” Fratley finished. “On this Journey, you have been quite the picture of

sensibility, practicality, and restraint… in my presence, that is. Am I stifling your true nature, Lady Freya?”

She replied matter-of-factly, “No, Sir Fratley, it is simply habit. I traveled alone for years, and when in the company of others kept mostly to my own council, and so even now I sometimes…”

“Forget that I exist?” asked her companion, feigning mild insult. “I am injured.”

Rather than an answering banter, the older Knight received a cold look and a flat reply. “I never once forgot you existed,” Freya nearly snapped at him. And then, flushing, she added in a softer, more apologetic tone, “But it is another habit of mine to think of you as lost. Perhaps I am more conscious of my manner when you are about, but it is only because I am unused to the company still.”

A silence followed, during which Freya resumed her perusal of the clouds that rushed by the prow of the ship, and Fratley joined her in this idle pursuit, although with unseeing eyes and thoughts turned inward for the moment. No one else joined them in their uninteresting sightseeing, and indeed no one else was on deck at all, with the exception of that day’s lookout, who was as silent and ignorable as

the crow's nest he sat in. Letting the wind cool her cheeks and sweep away some of her tousled feelings — which, she found to her chagrin, were as unmanageable as ever in Sir Fratley's presence — Freya closed her eyes again, and only opened them when her companion spoke once more.

"If it is a comfortable habit of yours to be alone now and again," he said, standing close by her side so that the wind would not snatch away his words, "then I apologize, and will take care not to disturb you so often."

Freya blinked a few times as she repeated his words in her mind, and realized that aside from the hours in which they slept, he had indeed not left her alone for longer than an hour since departing Cleyra. Even when in towns and cities and ships, when errands would separate them for a while, or even when she simply wandered off for a bit to get air or chase thoughts, he would eventually appear by her side.

…and she would usually be doing something that required explanation, like scrutinizing a handful of nuts with great concentration, carefully shaving thin slices from an inoffensive plant with the blade of her lance, or — on one memorable occassion — singing

an old Burmecian lullaby to an alley cat and her kittens. She had explanations for every occassion, of course, but…

“Why do you?” she blurted out, and then hastily added, “Not disturb me, as you said, but… seem to find me.”

He had allowed her to accompany him on this Journey, no longer called her just “Lady,” and seemed to find her company pleasant, but by no means had they regained the easy companionship of years ago that Freya remembered. If he now added her name to her title of Lady, still he had not called her by her name alone since the night before their departure. Conscious of the fact that Sir Fratley was having to renew their acquaintance from scratch, Freya tried not to lapse into the relationship she remembered, and thus quite possibly shock her proper and formal companion. Just now, she had nearly said, “…seek me out,” but as that implied that Sir Fratley desired her company, she bit it back, and changed the phrasing to something more innocuous. Her initial choice of words, however, turned out to be the more appropriate.

“Because I look for you,” Fratley replied quite naturally. At Freya’s blank look, he added as a sort

of dual question and statement, “This surprises you.”

Before Freya could think of something polite and yet true to say, he saved her the trouble by going on to explain. “You are both my companion on this Journey as well as one who stands in the stead of my past. I feel as if the better I know you… the better I could know my self.”

After turning this over in her mind for a while, Freya offered, “Well, and if you ever wish for stories of your lost past, I will be ever willing to supply them.”

The older Knight was looking out over the railing once more, and after nodding toward something far below them on the sea, noted, “I doubt we will have much time for idle talk for the rest of this Journey.” Freya followed his gaze down through the scattered clouds and spotted the peninsula on which the mountain of Daguerro rose tall and majestic.

Fratley turned to her once more and suggested, “But perhaps when we return to Burmecia.”

Smiling brightly, Freya replied with a bow, “At your service, Sir Fratley.”

3. Daguerro

Courage and Strength — Part III: Daguerro

A full month into their visit to the Daguerro archives, Sir Fratley suddenly wondered if he would be forced to spend the next ten years here, poring over old scrolls, piles of papers, and tattered leatherbound books. On their very first day here, Freya and Fratley had discovered, to their dismay, that no one in the massive library could remember anything specific about the Burmecian scholar who had stayed so long there. One archivist would have a vague memory of the man spending a great deal of time poring over the scrolls found in one section, and another would think that the Burmecian had last been seen writing notes from journals in another part of the library. In any case, nothing had been found out for certain, and the two Dragoons had decided to begin their search from scratch.

At first, Sir Fratley had suggested that they methodically go through all of the sections of the library that pertained in any way to the object of their Journey, such as ancient treasures, sources of magic, and spells. However, within one hour, Freya

had rather disgustedly observed that although categories were clearly marked throughout the shelving system of the archives, very little material was actually where it belonged. In fact, there were great stacks of books lying on tables, in aisleways, and even in the halls and being used as seats by those weary of standing. And the large collection of scrolls seemed not to have a special place at all, being found stuffed into odd baskets, propped up in corners, and underfoot everywhere they looked.

“With your leave, I shall begin my search in the East wing of the first floor,” Freya had decided. “And perhaps you might begin in that corner of the second floor,” she added, pointing to the opposite end of the semi-circular main room.

Fratley had nodded and then noted, “Hopefully we shall find what we seek before we meet each other halfway on the staircase.”

The younger Dragoon had glanced through the doorway, where some smaller archives lay branching off, and where the knowledge they sought might well be hiding, and then had shrugged. “And if not, well… we will surely have learned much in our searches, and be the better for it.”

And so they had begun their hunt, without even knowing what they were looking for, exactly. Mention of a jewel to bring the Divine Sandstorm back to life, but… in what form? A list of gemstone deposits? A book of spellbound items? A random treasure map, disguised as a scroll? They had carefully examined every item that could be examined, from handwritten papers to heavy tomes, rising early each day to attack the archives anew, and only returning to their grassy camp just outside the library many hours after sundown.

Sir Fratley had given in to practicality after a few days of an aching back, and made for himself a seat out of a pile of particularly heavy books, shifting it every day or so as he finished ransacking a particular shelf or table… or pile on the floor, as the case might be. And every once in a while, he would stand up, ostensibly to stretch, but in reality to peer over the railing of his floor to look for Freya. Most of the time, she would either be tucked out of sight, or wholly engrossed in some work, but now and again, she would glance up and see him, and then immediately put down whatever she was reading in order to come talk to him.

Whenever she did so, he would ask her for an update on her progress, and these briefings remained

the official reason for her quick trips up the stairs to where he was. Unofficially, however, they both knew that the main reason was that they craved the other's company. Sir Fratley only wondered now and again if Freya even realized how often he missed her random conversation, or even simply her presence, which was an inexplicable comfort to him. Yesterday, he had found himself bringing books over to the balcony, so that he could read and yet watch her.

Strange.

Perhaps he was homesick for Burmecia as well as learning quite rapidly to like this fey Lady, which explained this growing attachment a little better, although not quite satisfactorily. The Dragoon paused for a moment as he realized that he had stopped reading the book he was holding and had been poring over the topic of Freya instead for quite a while.

For the fifth time this week.

And it was only Tuesday.

Shaking his head, Sir Fratley put down his book for a moment, walked over to the railing once more, and let his gaze travel around the library, but the

now-familiar dusty blue tunic was nowhere to be seen. Of course, given the multiple levels and twisting aisles of shelves scattered about, Freya could have been only five feet away from him, and he might not have seen her. With a small shrug, he turned back to the volume he had been perusing and became lost in his searching once more, determinedly putting aside his vaguely confused musings over his traveling companion.

It was unlike him to be distracted by anything remotely personal on a Journey. All Novices had a certain code of priorities hammered into them from their first day, and this list of King, Kingdom, and Knights was as much a part of any Dragoon as their name and weapon. And when on a mission for the King, there was a separate, much simpler list, with only one item on it. The completion of the Journey. All other considerations such as family, friends, or other duties became so secondary that they did not even exist. Although he had not been sent on any missions since his return to Burmecia, still, he did not doubt that this code was as firmly placed into his being as any other precept of the Dragoon Order.

Of course, this segment of the Journey was different from most, in that it involved nothing more strenuous nor stressful than thumbing through pages

and trying not to fall asleep after seven hours of this monotonous duty. Perhaps it was not so strange after all, that his mind would insist on wandering now and again, and that his attention would seek out something — someone, rather — more entertaining than dry records.

“Happy birthday, Sir Fratley.”

The knight looked up in surprise, shutting the book he had been trying to read — and losing his place in the process — and asked the woman who had interrupted his thoughts, “What did you say?”

“I said happy birthday,” Freya responded with a smile, which was quickly replaced by a surprised look as Sir Fratley stared back at her rather blankly. “Don’t tell me you’ve gone three years without anyone wishing you well on this day,” she said in a protesting tone.

As Freya continued to stand over him, the Knight glanced away from her and continued his blank look, this time at nothing and no one in particular, and finally looked up at her once more and shook his head. Freya sat down abruptly onto the pile of large books he had been sorting through, absolutely aghast.

Amused at her reaction to what was actually a slight against himself, Fratley asked, “What day is it, by the way?”

Freya attempted to collect herself, and replied in a more normal voice, “It is the twenty-fifth of April.”

Her companion nodded and then fell silent, with a thoughtful frown creasing his brow. After a few quiet moments, with only the occassional cough or dropped book echoing through the massive archives, he looked over to where Freya sat and said, “The year I returned to Burmecia, I did come home one day in April to find that a book had been laid upon my doorstep. And the next year, there was quite a fine lance left for me.”

Shaking his head now at the memory, he told Freya, “At the time, I thought that perhaps they were items I had owned, and were at long last finding their way home from procrastinating borrowers, hiding behind anonimity and my memory loss. It seemed logical, as both the book and lance were quite to my tastes, but perhaps there was one person in Burmecia who had kept my birthdate, even if I had not?”

“Perhaps,” agreed Freya quite non-commitally, nodding at his updated theory.

Her nod was mimicked, and then he said in a grave and quiet voice, “Thank you.”

His thanks was quite ignored by Freya, who had subsumed into a sad sort of fog. He had been respected by all and yet loved by too few, and then seven years had gone by in which he was presumed dead and gone, but she found herself nearly to the point of tears that none had even kept his birthday save herself. Sir Fratley of Ice everyone thought him, and she had to admit, partly through his own fault, but Freya knew without doubt that he was as capable of love and care as anyone else, and also as capable of loneliness and hurt.

Swallowing back the thickness in her throat, she attempted a smile and said, “I have had neither time nor opportunity to search for an appropriate gift this year, but I will give you something that rightfully belongs to you.” Fishing a small silver ornament from her tunic pocket, she held it out and said, “I give you back a small piece of your past, Sir Fratley, and my wishes that each April finds you more and more content with your present and future.”

He held out his hand, and she dropped a silver Novice's medal into his waiting palm. The Dragoon looked at it in some surprised, and without thinking, his other hand flew up to his heart, where an identical medal lay pinned to the inside of his vest.

Freya watched him with some curiosity, for the gesture seemed rather theatrical, and therefore utterly unlike him. Wondering, she offered, "It is your Novice medal. I begged it of you one day as a memento, close on the end of my novitiate, and have kept it ever since."

Fratley nodded, but made no comment, simply looking at the small medallion with more wonder than Freya had ever anticipated. In actuality, his mind was quite seriously poring over the fact that this medal in left palm was his, with all of the wonder being directed toward the hidden one underneath his other hand.

The thought had crossed his mind back in Cleyra… that this medal he'd kept near his heart might be Freya's rather than his own. And such a sentimental gesture, combined with that day's events and his own rapidly changing attitude towards his former Novice had briefly sent an idea through his mind… that he might have loved this unique person

so many years ago, and had forgotten it just as he had forgotten everything else about her. With the passing of time, the fanciful, rather romantic idea had seemed to fade, and he had been more inclined to return to his assumption that it was simply his own medal from long ago.

But it wasn’t.

Closing his hand over his old medal, the Dragoon unfastened the first few buttons of his vest and began picking at the inside of the left panel, while Freya watched him with growing perplexity. She frowned slightly in confusion as he dropped his hands from his vest after just a minute, and then held out his right hand to her.

Just as he had opened his palm to her a few minutes ago, so she did the same to him this time, and was not at all enlightened when his Novice medal fell back into her possession. She blinked at the ornament in her palm, and then raised her head to ask why he had returned the memento, when she caught sight of it still resting in his left hand.

For a comic moment, Freya’s eyes glanced back and forth a few times, in order to make sure that she was not hallucinating, and then she peered more closely at the silver token in her hand. She tossed it

lightly, causing it to turn over, and then drew in a quick breath as she caught sight of the “F” scratched into the back of it.

“My medal!” she exclaimed, and then quickly looked up to meet Sir Fratley’s eyes, which were intent upon her face. ‘You had this?’ she asked in amazement. “All this time?”

He replied simply, “Yes, pinned to my vest.”

Almost in a whisper, she murmured, “You had me give this up along with my old lance and Novice’s uniform… I thought it had been thrown away…” and bent her head to look at it once more, and then both Dragoons fell silent and still as the same question formed in their minds.

Why?

Fratley had already made tentative answer to himself a long while ago, and felt it confirmed. Who he was, and how he was, taken into consideration, there was no reason save one for him to keep such a little token of hers so carefully hidden against his heart. Freya had confessed already her love for him, and just now told him she’d asked for his old medal to keep… for that same confessed reason, it was to

be assumed. If he'd kept the same memento of her in turn, and in even more secret…

Freya's thoughts traveled the same path as his, but so tremblingly that she barely formed the words in her mind, much less dared to wonder or hope. Already a bit emotional over Sir Fratley's forgotten birthday, Freya became afraid that she might actually weep in front of her former mentor. She'd faced up to their lost past, and acknowledged the fact that she might never regain their former camraderie, but to discover such a thing as this… a new what-might-have-been reared up in her heart and needed to be dealt with, but Freya felt that it was a bit much for her to face down with aplomb at the moment.

She hoped fervently that Sir Fratley only meant to make an exchange of these tokens to their former owners, and that she could leave him to his books once more without any emotional outbursts on her part.

Clearing her throat experimentally, she straightened up from her bowed position and said as normally as she could, "Thank you for keeping this for me, Sir Fratley," and began to search for a place under her shirt collar where she could pin her old

medal. However, a hand immediately reached over and uncurled her hand, plucking the ornament away.

Sir Fratley replaced it with the medal she had given him and said, “You are the keeper of my past, and this belongs with you. As for your medal, I wish to keep it… with your leave, of course,” he added, and Freya nodded her acquiescence as she pinned his medal into her vest — without really thinking about it, over her heart — with unsteady fingers.

“Thank you again,” Sir Fratley mentioned, “for the birthday gift.”

With raised eyebrows, Freya noted, “I did not actually give you anything, Sir Fratley, except for my well wishes.”

“A piece of my past, you said.”

Tapping her vest where his medal lay, she rejoined, “But you gave it back to me.”

“I did not mean the relic,” he said gravely. ‘I meant the knowledge… the more meaningful piece of my missing past.’ Freya only returned his steady gaze and did not respond, and so he went on, his voice soft even in the hush of the library. “You did not know either, did you, that I had loved you?”

Freya continued to gaze at him, quite still, and Fratley waited patiently and wondered if she would even respond to his admittedly uncharacteristic question. It seemed to him that the words were better suited for Freya's mouth than his, and yet it did not seem unduly unnatural for him to have spoken his thoughts so openly. It was a generalization of his to mark emotional people as weak, yet he admired and respected Freya, who was the most outwardly emotional Dragoon he had ever met. She was, at times, easily provoked into hot words, and as often had her inner thoughts broadcast upon her face. But somehow, this was simply the way she was, and it was not a weakness or fault to overcome, but one of her strengths, and he admired her all the more for her strange ways.

Recently, he had found himself wondering if perhaps his own reserve and rigid self-control might not be detriments in some way, and if he would be improved by taking a lesson or two from Freya's hand… or heart, as it might be. She let her heart hold sway over her head sometimes, but it only led her to noble pursuits, such as aiding the Queen of Alexandria, helping to rebuild Burmecia with her own hands instead of taking her post as Dragoon… and even setting off in search of a lost fellow

Knight. Her heart was worn on her sleeve, displayed with neither pride nor shame, but simply because it was her nature, and she was no less noble, honorable, or dutiful for it. And now, having spoken openly as he thought she might have, Fratley waited to see how she would react.

Finally, she shook her head, hesitantly at first, and then more smoothly, as if her body were slowly coming awake from a brief doze. Her face still rather expresionless, she said in a subdued voice, “No, Sir Fratley, I never knew… whether you loved me or not.”

The other Dragoon made note of her phrasing, but before he could comment, Freya went on. “But be it love or hate or indifference, the fact that it is in your past, and therefore lost, is certain.” She smiled, but the expression was singularly lacking in its usual liveliness, and Fratley found it almost painful to look upon. ‘Thank you, Sir Fratley,’ Freya continued, “but I believe I shall put the fancies of my novitiate behind me, for they do not comfort or amuse me any longer, and hope instead that I may continue to be worthy of the friendship and regard you offered me back in Cleyra.” With that, she rose, bowed politely, and then swiftly disappeared along the hallway and down the stairs.

Fratley remained seated for a moment, admittedly confused by what had just happened, and then stood as well, intending to follow Freya downstairs and back to her particular section of the archives. However, as he glanced over the railing to look for her, he saw her slip out of the main entrance instead. With a frown and a small sigh that escaped despite himself, the Knight turned back to his stack of books, picked one up, and sat staring at its pages.

* * * * *

Not in all the years of her novitiate had she ever voiced aloud any complaint, despite the long hours, torturous training, and oft-times harsh commentaries on her faults and failings. She had broken her wrist once — actually, Sir Fratley had inadvertently broken it for her — and she'd found herself gritting her teeth so hard in her determination not to shed a single tear, that soon her jaw had ached as much as her arm. Sir Fratley's concern and quick apology had given way to a surprised admiration at her stoic refusal to cry, and it had redoubled her desire to be "strong."

And now, high atop Daguerro's lonely peaks, Freya still did not cry, for fear that red eyes would betray her later on to her former mentor. She sat

hunched over with her knees drawn up to her chest, facing into the wind, swallowing back the tears that threatened, and letting the cold wind help dry her full eyes.

The closest she had come to breaking down in the past fifteen years was when a messenger had come to her door with news of Sir Fratley's death. She had not cried during her novitiate for pain or weariness or heartache, but of course her first impulse on that day had been to mourn. However, two things had stayed her tears. First, her incredulous denial that Sir Fratley could be dead. One did not mourn a person who still lived, and so she had denounced the news in an angry voice and refused to weep. And secondly… she had not ever cried in front of him, and she felt it would be wrong, somehow, to cry over him now.

She had not given into tears when he had finally come back to Burmecia and not recognized her, either. She had not wept in the three years since his return, either from hurt or betrayal or more heartache, but now, she was overwhelmed with the need to mourn once more. Not for her loss of him, for he was nearer to her now than he had been when she had first heard of his death, but because of what he had told her.

You did not know either, did you, that I had loved you?

No, of course not. She had admired him, been infatuated with him, and loved him. She had given him all of her loyalty and dutiful attention, and respected him to the point where she would presume to argue with him on occassion since she would not lie to him, not even by nodding assent where she thought him mistaken. And she had been able to draw out his humorous, affectionate nature, and reveled in it. Every smile and laugh she wrung from him seemed a grand triumph for her, just as every moment in which she found him alone and lonely would seem to her the greatest heartbreak of her life. Yet as close as she was to him, although she was the only one in all of Burmecia to hear him truly laugh, there was nothing in his manner to suggest — to her eyes, at least — that he thought of her as than more than a friend.

He had loved her. Of course he had loved her! But as his bright and unusual Novice, as his tried and true friend, and as his strange and unique fellow Knight. She loved him in the same way, and in one way more, and it was as a lover that Freya felt she could not fill the void in Sir Fratley's heart. Everyone thought Sir Fratley lacked such a

common, lowly thing as a sense of humor except for Freya, and she became adept at the light mockery and banter that seemed best to bring his rare smiles to light. And in the same way, everyone had long ago decided that the only companions Sir Fratley needed were duty and honor, so Freya made it her habit to constantly attend him, that he might not feel alone. In these things Freya had been utterly confident of her place at his side… but when her love for him was foremost in her mind, she had quailed.

Crossing her arms over her knees, Freya sighed and frowned, almost piqued with herself that she could not manage to quash down the very last of the tears that had welled up in her eyes when she'd first scrambled up this mountaintop over an hour ago, seeking solitude. Blinking rapidly while concentrating on drawing in deep, even breaths, she reflected on the state of things as they had been this morning.

She had been content, and more than content in the years prior to Sir Fratley's departure, despite her unrequited love. And until a brief hour ago, had been content as well, to let the memory of their former relationship lie quietly in her heart. There was no longer bitterness or anger, and neither did

she want to pore over her memories and stir them up again. Like Sir Fratley's Novice medal that she had treasured for so long, she thought to simply keep them with her as a memento of what had been. She had his friendship and respect, and seemed to be regaining her position as the one oddity in all of Burmecia to make him smile, and dislodge a bit the mantle of formality and reserve he wore. As she had decided in Cleyra, it was enough. Even if she never again had the chance to speak of her love, even if he never regarded her more than a curiosity and companion, it was enough for her now. She had gotten over her loss, and found that what remained was sufficient.

But now there was a "what might have been," and it was this that made Freya struggle — have to really struggle — against tears of mourning for the second time. She had already fought her one battle of anger and pain at everything that had been taken away along with Sir Fratley's memory. But those were memories that she at least still held, even if Sir Fratley did not. Now, his brief question revealed a possible future that had been lost as well.

You did not know either, did you, that I had loved you?

Of course not! If she had, she wouldn't have hesitated a single instant, but asked — no, demanded — that he take her with him. Perhaps if she had known, she might have made known to him her own feelings, and she would not have even needed to ask… he would have come to her first. They might have even planned the trip together, assuming that the other would as a matter of course make the journey as well.

She hadn't just lost their shared past. She had lost one possible future with him.

She might have gone with him, and shared in the danger. Perhaps his memory would have remained intact, had she been there to give him aid. Or perhaps her memory would have been taken as well, but then at least she wouldn't have known what she'd lost.

You did not know either, did you, that I had loved you?

If he loved me then he should have told me so!

…yes, well, I loved him and I did not tell him either.

Freya gritted her teeth, her eyes shut tight and her expression a closed-in mask of pain. Then, as if her

angry, unspoken accusation and mournful reply had been a sort of slap to her own face, she dropped her head into the arms crossed over her knees and moaned. It was a soft, helpless noise, and anyone who heard it come from her, of all Dragoons, would have likely staggered and then fallen over their own feet in surprise. She was, as Sir Fratley noted, emotional, but all of her outbursts were of a fiery, passionate sort… nothing at all like this quiet, despairing cry that no one was meant to hear.

* * * * *

Freya started and opened her eyes, and was surprised to find that she had dozed off after dropping her head down into her arms for a while. Still sitting in the same position, she closed her eyes once more and gingerly raised her head, wincing a bit at the stiffness that had settled into her muscles during her cramped nap on this cold, windy mountaintop. Massaging her neck with one hand, she gave a brief sigh as if to expel the very last of her unsettled emotions, and then opened her eyes.

Seated in front of her was Sir Fratley, watching her with as normal an expression as if he had simply joined her for a brief moment of stargazing.

The same could not be said of Freya's features at first, but she soon got them under her command once more, and then greeted him for lack of any other immediate ideas. "Good evening, Sir Fratley." She was relieved to hear her voice come out quite steadily. Her brief nap seemed to have settled her mind and heart wonderfully, and she felt quite calm now. Sir Fratley nodded to her in reply, and she asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I thought to watch over you, lest you tumble off of the top of the mountain," he said lightly.

She flushed slightly, but hoped that the dim moonlight was not sufficient to make it apparent, and retorted, "I am possessed of better balance and reflexes than that, Sir Fratley."

"Of course," he replied. "My apologies." They were both silent for a moment, and Freya began to wonder anew what he really was doing there, but then her companion spoke up once more.

"I have wronged you on another point as well," he began. "I have upset and distracted you while on this Journey, and I apologize."

Freya nodded briefly in acknowledgment. She knew as well as any Dragoon the importance of

staying focused on a Journey, and felt regret that she'd once again behaved with such obvious emotion before her former Mentor. Self-control was not going to be high on Sir Fraltey's list of her commendable qualities. "I apologize as well," she said quickly, "for letting your words have such apparent effect on me."

After a moment's thought, Freya said, "In one way, I regret speaking so freely to you the afternoon before our departure, and must apologize for bringing it before you time and again. I spoke of broken hearts and unbearable pain, but I would now ask you to forget that I spoke at all, for truly, I am content as you bade me to be, with being your companion now." With a small moue of embarassment, she added, "It is to my shame that the topic would come up, and then lead to me abandoning an afternoon's worth of work, and I would not have it happen again."

After a moment's consideration, Fratley asked, "I am your former mentor, and a more seasoned veteran within the Dragoon Guards, and may command you as such, may I not?"

Freya had to stop her mental tracks entirely and reorient herself into the new conversational territory.

It seemed that she would need to adjust herself to her companion's apparent propensity for responding to her sentimental moments with apparently unconnected questions and lectures about the code of knighthood they lived by. Although Sir Fratley's character and mindset had not changed in the years that she had thought him lost to her, still she had never before trod such conversational grounds with him, and every blundering thing she blurted out seemed to lead her straight into one of these strange, confusing talks with him.

"Of course," replied Freya, wondering if perhaps he would command her as her superior to not speak anymore of her feelings, that they might complete their Journey without any further distractions. A Dragoon on a mission for the King had one concern, and one concern only, and that was to return to the King, successful. All else in that Dragoon's life was secondary, and such insignificant secondary that it did not exist at all. On all the trips she had previously accompanied Sir Fratley on, there had been much confidential conversation and absolutely inane remarks made solely for the purpose of entertainment and camraderie. But of course, Sir Fratley did not remember any of their shared past and shared friendship, and disapproval of idle banter

would be quite in keeping with his proper nature. But surely on a journey that might last for years, with two experienced warriors, allowances could be made? He had forgotten, but perhaps they might rediscover the friendship that had lain between them so long ago.

Freya turned her ears attentively to her former mentor, and readied herself for whatever command he might choose to issue.

“Then, Lady Freya,” her former mentor announced sternly, “you will not apologize for how you feel towards me ever again.”

Freya blinked, and then before she could help it, one eyebrow quirked up and one ear drooped down, and she stared at Sir Fratley all askew in obvious confusion.

He observed her expression, and to his credit, did not burst out laughing. He did press his lips together slightly, however, but perhaps it was a moue at her immature display, rather than an attempt to keep from smiling. With a thoughtful look at nothing at all, located somewhat to the left of her, Fratley said, “Perhaps it is churlish of me to say this, without being able to promise you a like devotion in return, but your faithfulness and love are a comfort to me.”

“I have no memories of my life,” he continued, and then looked off to the north, where Burmecia lay beyond the ocean. “And I found no one in all our kingdom who could claim to have held for me any large part of my past. None but one, who with remarkable steadfastness kept my memories alive within her own heart for the five years that I was dead to all around her, and then with great patience waited three more years for me to ask her about them once I had returned.”

Pulling his eyes away from the inky darkness of the sea, Fratley fixed his gaze upon Freya once more and said in a grave and yet gentle voice, “I can not promise you anything, and do not take this harshly, for I have truly only met you a scant month ago. And so I will not expect nor ask you to keep so ever faithful… but while you do love me, never think that it is a burden to me. Indeed, in addition to comfort beyond measure, it is an honor to me, to have such a heart as yours to think of as mine.”

Freya stared for a while, amazed beyond the realms of speech and motion at this unexpected and unprecedented confession. Apart from the sentimental tone of his words, there were hints of the loneliness and loss that Freya had guessed at yet never thought to hear him admit to, and it was

several minutes before she found the voice to reply in a rather husky whisper, “The honor is mine…” She dropped her tented knees to sit in a cross-legged manner, and then bowed her head to him, feeling a bit overwhelmed.

When she raised her head, he was watching her still, and now with a faint smile about his face. Feeling that the conversation was safely over, Freya got up, twisting slightly to work a few kinks out of her back, and waited as Sir Fratley also rose at her mute suggestion that they leave this windblown spot and make their way back down to their encampment.

Once standing, Sir Fratley spoke again. “I agree with you,” he added, ‘that our lost past is a distracting topic, and we shall not speak of it again while on this Journey.’ Freya nodded, but then Sir Fratley declared, “But once we are in Cleyra again, I intend to have this out with you. I can not forget your words, and neither do I wish for you to regret speaking them.”

From bubbling anticipation over being able to wish him well on his birthday to sympathetic depression over the fact that she was the only one to do so, and from lonely tears at what had been lost to a new, secret hope welling up at what might yet

be… all in one day. She really didn't have any control over her heart at all, and from the slight smile that now flickered over Sir Fratley's face, she could assume that she was not exercising very much control over her expression, either. She attempted to pull her features down into a mask more appropriate to a calm, collected Dragoon Knight, but then gave up after only a moment. It seemed to be her oddities that Sir Fratley found amusing, and she might as well be her-odd-self in front of the one she wished for. If she were to win him with utterly formal ways and manners, then the rest of her life would be torturous at least.

Freya gave up and smiled at Sir Fratley as inclinations gave her to do. It was a wide, utterly unabashed smile that had the qualities of both a blissful child and a contented woman, and this combination of innocent and wise happiness was a particular one that Fratley liked very much to see on this strange friend of his. To see her smile thus, and because of some chance thing that he had said, proved as satisfying to him as if he'd had a hand in some far greater task than simply making a woman smile.

How many people could he make smile, anyway, in this genuine manner? Probably no more than were

gathered here on this mountaintop. But then, Freya was a rather unique woman… and on further thought, certainly he was a rather unique man. The thought seemed to him unusually amusing, and in his present mood — which was certainly more sentimental and light-hearted than even Freya might have dreamt — Fratley found it quite natural to return Freya's smile with one just as heartfelt, although perhaps not as wide.

The smile stayed on her face, but Freya's eyes went quite comically wide. But of course, as the sight of the most reserved of Dragoons smiling at her was as pleasing as it was unusual, her pale blue eyes were soon crinkled up in a happy expression once more. The quick revolutions in her features actually teased a short, breathy laugh from her companion, who then turned to lead the way off of the peak, shaking his head at her most of the way down.

4. Daguerro to Fire Shrine

Courage and Strength — Part IV: Daguerro to Fire Shrine

Freya breathed out slowly, idly watching her breath form misty clouds in the biting cold air of the Forgotten Continent. She puffed out one quick breath, and watched the rotund cloud drift away, like the snorted smoke from a dragon's nostrils. A few more puffs to amuse herself with the fancy that she was a small, pale blue dragon, and then she pursed her mouth and blew out a thin tendril of breath, watching the vapor trail away from her like a river. She opened her jaw wide to see how large of a breath-cloud she might form, but then clapped her mouth shut once more as Sir Fratley's voice suddenly cut through the air.

"You do these things just to pique my curiosity about yourself, don't you?"

"No, Sir Fratley," she replied pertly as she turned to face him. "I was bored, and as a particularly immature and foolish person unworthy of the uniform of a Dragoon Knight, I chose to play about."

“What did you see while I was gone?” he asked immediately, as if he hadn’t heard her flippant reply at all.

Turning and pointing as she recited her watch, Freya replied, “One red dragon wheeling over that mountain a half hour ago, anywhere from eight to fifty-two clusters that I believe are wraiths ranging in and out of the shade along that ridgeline for the entire duration of your absence, the shadow of a Dragoon Knight forty-seven minutes ago on the ledge just above that crevasse, that same shadow twenty-two minutes ago on the snowbank below that cavern, and the shadow yet again falling across the ice sheet below us just ten seconds ago before you leapt up to this lookout point.”

Raising an eyebrow, Fratley asked, “How can you be so certain that it was a Dragoon Knight’s shadow?”

With a smile, she replied, “I stood in it for years. I know it well.” Freya then stooped to pick up her pack and then turned to her fellow Knight that she might hand him back the lance he had left in her keeping, but paused as she found herself being frowned upon.

“Sir Fratley?”

Still frowning at her, he said, “You did not mean that to imply physical proximity.”

There was a pause in which she searched for a way to defuse her phrasing without actually lying to him, but gave up and then answered, “No. I meant it in its usual figurative manner. Your reputation was great, Sir Fratley. I was quite lost in it while your Novice.”

“Because I am a ‘Legendary Knight,’” he said, nodding in a rueful manner. “The Ice-Hearted Dragoon, Sir Frighteningly Formal Fratley, and other such names that people use to refer to me both in jest, and in earnest when I am not within earshot… or so they think.”

“You forgot the Merciless Mentor,” Freya added, before she could stop her mouth from running ahead of her brain.

But he only raised an eyebrow and asked, “Is that what you called me?”

On the whole rather relieved at his bland response and the wiping away of the frown, although not quite ecstatic at the question, his former Novice answered, “No, it was what the other Novices called you. Most often the name was

brought up after I staggered in to our quarters five hours after everyone else had ended their day, or when they visited me in the infirmary after a particularly hard-learned lesson. You were quite the popular mentor to abuse, Sir Fratley."

"Such harshness toward their elder," noted the Merciless Mentor with a mockingly mournful shake of his head. 'And you?' he asked, "by what name did you call me, or refer to me, as the case might be?"

Freya shrugged and replied, "Sir Fratley or Sir Knight I called you, and as for referring to you, I always said, 'My Mentor.'"

A thoughtful frown creased that mentor's brow, and he noted, "Quite a formal and serious young Novice you seemed to be, Lady Freya." And before Freya could shrug or nod in reply, he added in a laughing voice, "What happened to you?" Freya blinked at the sudden change from serious to humorous, and nearly loosed her jaw as he actually grinned at her.

She kept her mouth from falling open, however, and smiled in return. After giving an instant's thought to his question, she said by way of explanation, "You left."

Now it was Sir Fratley who looked surprised, and he fell silent for a while. Suddenly he frowned anew and repeated after her, “I left,” having apparently been musing over this phrase for a while, and not coming to any solid conclusion.

It was not phrased as a question, but Freya understood that he found her two word answer unsatisfactory. “You left,” she said again, and then went on. ‘And for the first time in years, you were not there for me to rely upon, nor to form my opinions around.’ With a sigh, she continued, “You molded me too well during my novitiate, Sir Fratley. When I became a Dragoon, I was little better than a slightly shorter copy of you. My standards, morals, likes and dislikes were all mirrors of how I understood yours to be, and I based all of my decisions on what I knew of your character. It is only the fact that you are as dedicated and loyal to the our order’s precepts that this mimicry of mine went unnoticed, and all alike applauded the Dragoon you had made of me.”

Fratley was watching her with growing upset at this revelation of hers, and finally cut in with, “You make yourself sound utterly without mind or heart of your own… as if I had merely hollowed you out and created of you a doppelganger.”

Freya shook her head, closing her eyes against the ends of her hair that whipped around her face as she did so, and remembering the double-agony of losing Sir Fratley's presence in her life, and realizing what an idol she had made of him at her own expense. "No, not you… I," she corrected. "I held you in such high regard that I strove to be all that I thought you wished in a Novice, rather than all that I could be as a Dragoon."

"Then I failed you as a Mentor," came the regretful whisper.

"No, not really." Freya looked across the glaringly white landscape, as if far-seeing all of the lands she had covered while traveling in search of the one near her now, and later on while pursuing Kuja with Zidane and his mis-matched band of adventurers. 'When I left Burmecia in search of you, the years of my novitiate served me well in keeping me alive. If I spent my time molding myself after one Dragoon in particular, rather than searching for the Knight I might make, then I could not have chosen a better model, could I?' she asked, smiling at Sir Fratley again. He still looked uneasy, and she added, "Your final lesson to me came years after I became a Dragoon, but I learned it well. You left, and I completed my training by serving my King

and kingdom without your constant guidance. I found that the rash impulses and emotions that I had fought to control so often served me well in times of stress and strain, and that there are differences between what is lawful, what is right, and what is Godly."

After taking a deep breath, Freya said decidedly, "I am who I am today, and it is emotional, weak, and downright rude at times, but my foundations are built upon the strength, honor, and morals that I so admired in you. You didn't fail me at all, Sir Fratley. My life has unfolded as it needed to, and now… my only regret is your lost memory, and not the fact that you left in the first place."

She trailed off, there was no reply, and so the two Knights fell into a silent contemplation of the snowy landscape once more. Freya shot random glances at her companion, and wondered wistfully what he was thinking. Not that she had ever had the ability to read his mind, but with all that had happened, she felt as if she had been thrown back to square one — and on an entirely different board at that — and was now more uncertain than ever as to her ability to guess his mood and mind.

During one of her glances, Fratley happened to look sidelong at her as well, and their eyes met. After a brief stare-down, during which Freya began to feel a bit awkward, the older Dragoon said, “Back to the Merciless Mentor subject…”

Freya hastily ran backwards through their conversation until she found the right spot, and then gave him a brief nod as her only reply.

Still gazing into her clear blue eyes, Fratley said, “After what sounds as if it were a hard novitiate, my departure, and my coldness after my return… I suppose I should have expected you to be wary of me.” Freya began to protest his words, which gave her a mental vision of herself watching Sir Fratley with the eyes of a bird trapped in a cage with a snake, but he forstalled her by simply going on as if she hadn’t begun to speak.

“I’ve returned to Burmecia to find my heartless reputation intact, and I must admit… I have done nothing to dispell it,” Fratley admitted with a shrug. “But there was one person who, from what I know, found me to be quite ordinary and likeable, and even gave me birthday gifts. ’Twould be worth the effort, for me, to be able to have such a relationship again,

with such a person, to keep me from being no more than a hard-hearted Knight."

Freya said firmly and with much more contradiction in her tone than was strictly proper, "You never were hard-hearted, nor shall you ever be, and it is likely an illusion of your own that you think all in Burmecia are so afraid of you."

It was a heart-breaking expression, and Freya, for a moment, lost track of her name as he smiled at her… slow, sad, and wistful. So very unlike the First Knight of the King's Guard, but the very image of the man who lived in Freya's heart. He said, "But you are the only one in all of Burmecia who would ever tell me such a thing."

And Freya felt her heart sink a bit, because she knew it was true. Her Sir Fratley was too well hidden behind his reputation and reserve. Upset at it, she said in a low voice, "Well, and it is your own fault."

Rather than follow her mood, Fratley replied, "And I hereby make it your duty to keep me from commiting this fault time and time again once we return to Burmecia and the company of our fellows."

Well pleased with the duty, Freya smiled and said lightly, “And here I thought I was to be chastised for playing about while you were gone, but now you admonish me to try and corrupt you with my childish ways.”

With a shrug, Sir Fratley noted, “Well, and continue to play if you wish, as it seems not to affect your attentiveness to your duty. We shall see if you Mentor me in your ways well enough that I should join you some day.” He shouldered the pack he had left with her while exploring and pointed northwards with the lance that he finally took from her hand. “None of the caverns in this mountain have such ice-slicked walls as the history indicates. It seems that this Fire Shrine you discovered while traveling with Zidane is our destination after all.”

Freya nodded thoughtfully and started down the icy mountain in the direction her companion had indicated, thinking back to the ancient tome that had directed their steps thus far across the frozen continent to the north of Daguerro. A vision of the cracked parchment and tattered leather binding flickered to life in her mind’s eye, and the memories associated with it floated back as well.

* * * * *

“Freya!”

She jumped to her feet immediately, laying down the book she had been reading so swiftly that it slid along the bench for a good while before tipping entirely off of the smooth wooden surface. A few quick steps brought her out of her aisle and to the railing where she peered upwards to see what Sir Fratley needed. The surprise of suddenly hearing him call out her name was brushed aside by a sudden excitement as she saw him waving a book at her. The gesture in and of itself was nothing extraordinary… he was merely holding up one hand to about the height of his face, and rotating his wrist a bit to draw attention to the tome he was holding. But he had shouted in the middle of a library… and her name, no less… rather than take the few minutes necessary to walk over to where she was, and was now teasing at her with this little waving of a book.

Certain of what this meant, and quite careless of further disturbing the Daguerro archives’ other patrons, she suddenly crouched and made two giant leaps over the water running through the library. One jump took her to the circular platform in the center of the main room, and the second vaulted her directly onto the railing upon which Sir Fratley was resting his elbows.

Before the blue fabric of her cloak had even begun to settle around her, she asked with great eagerness, “Is that it?”

“Attend me properly and I shall tell you,” came the snorted reply. She obeyed with alacrity, stepping down to the floor and standing at attention within a moment, but her prompt compliance and rigid posture were rather spoilt by the roll of her eyes.

“Impudent woman,” Sir Fratley muttered, and then held open the book right before her eyes.

Blue eyes narrowed and scanned the cramped writing before her for a while, and then opened wide as she digested the passages. “This could be the Fire Shrine!” she finally exclaimed after reading further.

Explanations followed, with Freya detailing her brief journey to one of the four Elemental temples while hurriedly reading through the rest of the thin book now in her hands. The pages detailed a hidden volcano whose life ebbed and flowed as a tide, but on a far different schedule. The lava flowed through a certain mountain’s inner caverns like hot blood through rocky veins all the year round but for one day between summer and autumn. On that day, the lava receded and the inner caverns took on the same slick, icy coating that characterized the outer

passages of the mountain, and even the innermost sanctums of the place could be reached. But the cooling took some time, and the actual window of time in which one might proceed into the deepest parts of the volcano without being singed was little better than an hour.

Freya read through accounts of the wonderous gemstones that grew along the edge of a vein of mythril deep within the mountain, gems that glowed red with their own fire, as if the lava that bathed them all year long had imparted some of its heat and brilliance. Gems that were reputed to hold great power.

Great magic.

The volcano was a hidden heat underneath a great mountain of ice and snow. Freya read through the frustratingly short descriptions of the mountain itself, and the infuriatingly vague sentence about its location, and then grew concerned over the many pages luridly describing the volcano as a fatal and horrible place without giving a single clue as to why it might be either fatal or horrible. And then she put on an expression of absolute insult as she turned the page to find the rest of its brethren missing, their

only legacy a few scraps of torn parchment clinging to the binding.

“I see by your disgusted expression that you have finished your reading,” Sir Fratley commented.

“I have not,” Freya replied immediately. “How could I finish when the book is incomplete?”

Her former Mentor took the offending volume from her and began walking, leading the way to the stairs. “Be that as it may, I believe it to be the information which we seek.

Freya nodded after a quick mental review of all that she had read, and then the two Dragoons left the library — after gaining permission to borrow the precious book — in order to plot their next step back at camp. It was agreed that their time would likely be wasted in trying to find yet more information in digging through the archives, a task which could theoretically take the rest of the year without yielding any more results.

The scanty information detailing the volcano and its location pointed to the Forgotten Continent, with its ice-bound mountains and little-explored expanse. The Fire Shrine that Freya had been reminded of was within the northernmost mountain range, and

was only a three-months' journey away. Yet if it proved to be the wrong mountain, that left little time in which to try and discover the true place. So the next morning, the two Knights had struck camp and left for the frozen continent to the north with the intention of scrying out every likely mountain they came across while traveling towards the Fire Shrine. Should they find the fabled volcano before reaching the shrine, so much the better. But if the Fire Shrine ended up being the same volcano they sought, they should still be able to reach it before the first of October even with all of their stops to explore other sites.

* * * * *

They made camp that night at the base of the mountain range that ringed in the crater of lava that was now known as the Fire Shrine to most people. The last day of September. If this mountain proved to be the wrong location after all, or if they could not find the appropriate entrance in time, it would mean another year of searching.

Another possibility suddenly sprang to mind, and Freya looked to Sir Fratley across their campfire and said, "I've just thought of something." Brown eyes looked back at her inquiringly, and she answered,

“This volcano only recently erupted a few years back, creating this new crater lake of lava. What if the cavern containing the gems collapsed in this recent upheaval?”

The older Dragoon considered the possibility for a few minutes, and then said rather blandly, “Then we shall return to Daguerro and search the rest of the archives in the hopes that this was merely a false trail. And if it turns out that the deposit of gems is indeed lost to us in this fiery lake, then we shall return to Cleyra and report so to the King.”

“You say that so easily,” Freya said in a slightly protesting tone, the idea of returning without the asked-for gemstone rather more daunting to her than the task that awaited them the next day.

In his old, “Mentor” tone of voice, Fratley replied, “Not all Journeys end in success. But if one has done their duty by the King, then an unfulfilled mission need not equal failure.”

Freya nodded, but then added as a sort of rueful afterthought, “I would rather succeed.”

He breathed out a short laugh at her obvious statement and then ordered, “Then go to sleep, and

rest well for the coming day. I shall take first watch."

"Yes, Sir Fratley."

5. Fire Shrine

Courage and Strength — Part V: Fire Shrine

Freya poked her head into a crevasse and then jerked her head back immediately. Not having seen anything nor smelled anything amiss, she glanced into the opening again and then cautiously stepped forward. She explored the winding fissure in the mountain of the Fire Shrine for a few minutes, but then turned back after only a short while. The passageways were jagged rock, icy cold to the touch, and quite dry. The entrance to the fissure itself was packed with crumbling snow, which did not answer to the descriptions she had read of in the book that had directed them thus far. It was mid-morning, and after several hours already of searching and nearly half the mountain's face explored, the fabled gemstones did not seem to be any nearer to hand than they had been a month ago.

Coming out into the shadow of the mountain once more, she glanced about and found Sir Fratley climbing towards her in quick, short leaps from the larger cavern that he had just finished exploring. She tilted her head at him inquiringly, but he shook his

head. Once within speaking distance, he called out, “None of the caverns I explored seemed likely. But I think we are close.” Pointing back towards the way he had come, he indicated the caverns he had chosen to explore, which were scattered across the lower half of the shadowy side of the mountain. “There, along the edge of the shade, were some small caves that wound along for some time as usual, and then grew markedly heated. The ones directly below us were quite frozen.”

“So perhaps the cavern we seek is just beyond those there, in the sunlight.” Freya noted with a nod. Rather than answer, Fratley simply inclined his head down the mountain and began leading the way back down, jumping from various ledges and outcroppings of rock as easily as a human child might skip along paving stones.

* * * * *

The sun had not yet gained the high point of the sky when Freya finally found something of note. After calling her companion over, she resumed examining the entrance to a large cavern she had discovered.

Like the others scattered high about the northeastern side of the mountain, this crevasse

breathed warm air from its maw, indicating that their depths were connected in some manner to the lava that flowed within. They all had rocky patches in front of them as the heat slowly melted a clearing in the ice and snow that bound the mountain from top to bottom. However, this cavern in particular had a strange, slick icepatch forming within the cleared area, fed by a slowly trickling stream of the same slimy liquid.

It had the appearance of water, but moved with all the sluggishness of chilled oil, and the oddity of finding a frozen puddle forming in front of the heated cave had further caught Freya's eye. There was also a strange, coppery tang to the stuff that made her uneasy somehow.

Sir Fratley stood by her side for a moment, examining the rivulet leading from the cavern that fed the ever-expanding puddle, and then stepped inside the opening to have a quick look about. After a minute or so, he returned and then said, "I think you have found it, Lady Freya."

She nodded in reply, but slowly, as if reluctant, and it caught his attention.

"What troubles you?"

After a thoughtful frown, she suddenly blurted, “It has been nagging at my mind for a few hours now… if there were records of this gemstone deposit including its location as well as how and when one might come to claim it, it seems to me that the taking of one of these gems should not be so easy.”

“Easy, Lady Freya?” Fratley returned with mild surprise. “You are more hardy than I thought, if you think the fruits of our labor during the past six months have been simply won.”

She shook her head and replied, “No, but what is there here that we have not been able to face with hope of success? Surely these gems are of value enough that kings and queens before ours must have given thought to retrieving one or more, and the dangers here are no more than a small company of soldiers might have been able to overcome.”

“There are treasures enough already unearthed to occupy the minds of rulers all over the world,” Fratley noted, “without their having to dig through archives and earth to find new ones.”

“Perhaps,” Freya conceded, and then added, “Still, this simple task to walking up and taking the stone in hand strikes me as oversimple.” The lurid descriptions of danger and the missing pages from

their guide floated in her mind's eye like shades trying to warn of danger. She tried to shake them off, dismissing them as manifestations of nerves. Fratley spoke once more, and she focused on his voice to further settle herself to the completion of their task.

"Not all worthy treasures are guarded appropriately. Do not call trouble, for it finds us often enough without invitation."

She gave a laugh at that, and replied, "True enough, Sir Fratley."

* * * * *

The lava flowed steadily through the tunnels and caverns, sometimes bubbling up in a small cave like a molten spring, and sometimes emptying out into a gorge like a fiery waterfall. All throughout the mountain's veins and arteries, the volcano's hot blood pulsed, filling every crack that it poured into. There was only one series of caverns that the lava did not fill, by the grace of being situated near the very top of the mountain's upper rim, and its lengthy, winding chambers and passageways being out of the lava's creeping, flowing reach. Molten rock yearned upwards through the cracks and crevasses that led to the caverns, but from many yards away, instead pouring out and down into a

deep, never-filled lake. Only heat rose upwards without any concern for gravity, and it was this ever present heat that kept the ice wraiths trapped within their lofty, lonely caverns.

They filled the caverns with their unearthly shrieks, constantly shifting and stirring, restless and mad from the day they were hatched until the day they died. Long, knobby limbs with pale, leathery hides stretched over them were constantly stretched, pushed into their fellows, and then retracted as irritated hisses and snarls met the intrusion. They gnashed the rocks of their ever-expanding caverns with long, diamond-hard fangs. They clung to the ceilings and walls and floors and each other with cruel claws, and flew short, clumsy, cramped flights wherever a breath of space could be found to fly in. And they bred, and bred, and bred, each female filled to bursting with eggs and young that devoured her from the inside out, until the caverns could hold them no longer, and they spilled down into the tunnels that led to the burning waterfall. And there, in the chain of heated chimneys, they screamed and shrieked and clawed their neighbors to death as they tried to escape the rising heat. Their bodies would hiss and steam as the cold air they exuded fought with the superior might of the volcano’s breath, and

all year long, but for one day, the ice wraiths' population would be checked.

All year long, but for one day, the ice wraiths fought and clawed and gnashed and bred and died. And on that one day, those that slid and were pushed down the chimney lived just a little bit longer on the way down. And those that died first lengthened the life of those that followed just a bit longer with the frost from their bodies. And so on, and so on, until the ice wraiths began to pour down the tunnels, leathery wings tucked close to their bodies as they plummeted down the long-forbidden paths, the ones in front screaming and dying and paving the roads with their frost, heeding some buried instinct to push on, and on. And so on, and so on, twisting through tunnels, turning back from hot ones, and pouring into cooling ones, until the one path to the outside of the mountain had been cleared, and the ice wraiths could explode into the snowy air to glut themselves on ice and salt water and snow, to prepare for another year of seclusion in their cavern, killing each other and breeding up new kin.

That day was near. That day was now. A bulging ice wraith stumbled near the flue upon another wraith, and immediately received a tearing blow from an angry claw. She struck back, the full weight

of her torn, pregnant belly bearing down upon her attacker, but her oily, icy blood was everywhere and in every nose, and she was soon lost in the frenzy that ensued. Her unrecognizable remains slid down the chimney, followed by some dozens of her unborn kits, leaving behind a trail of frozen gore. Two or three of her attackers followed her down to their deaths, and others sniffed at the tunnel they had rashly gone down.

Cooler.

The sniffing ones were jostled by the ever-restless mass of their kindred, and some fought, while some were struck down and sent flying down the tunnel as well. More bodies fell, some flailing out, some attempting to fly, and some already dead. At the edge of the cavern, more sniffing ones replaced the ones that had gone down.

Not-hot.

More and more misty white shapes began to fly down the tunnel, with the living now outnumbering the slain and the rivers of frozen blood paving the way. More and more ice wraiths dared the tunnel, the cooling tunnel, the not-hot tunnel, and the dormant idea, the dream, the memory of ice and snow and water began to stir in the colony. Even

those kits that had never smelled the outside air began to salivate for salt water and ice, real ice, not blood ice as the idea of Outside began to move through the pack, as silently and surely as any hive-mind communicated a thought. Now wraiths fought to go down the chimney that they had fought to stay out of mere days ago. The lava was receding. The tunnels were cooling with the blood of their kindred. The day was here.

Outside!

* * * * *

Torch in hand, Fratley put one cautious hand on the rocky edges of the cavern and looked back at Freya from several feet within.

“The rocks are warm, but not unbearably so,” he noted. “And there is a cold wind blowing out in addition to this odd stream chilling the floor. The record was right. Whether magic or not I do not know, but the tunnel is being cooled.”

Freya stepped up to his side and let the bitter air ruffle her hair and clothing for a moment before replying. “Well, whether magic or not, it will not wait for us,” she finally said. “There is only one

hour’s time in which to find the gems. Let us proceed as far as we can, at least.”

“Agreed.”

Holding their lances at an angle so as not to mar the tips against the low ceiling, the two Knights began threading their way through the cavern.

* * * * *

The wraiths were nearly wall-to-wall now, with claws digging into rock and flesh with equal ferocity in the rush for open air, their maddened minds uncaring of whether or not they injured their kindred. The wraiths climbing over the walls suffered the most, as the creatures in the center of the passageways clawed at them in order to better propel themselves along, and frenzied wings slashed open flesh nearly as often as they cut through the air.

The icy blood that led the way down the ever-falling floor was now a river that reached from one side of the passage to the other, further propelled along by the bodies that thudded to the ground and then slid forward, weight and the slickness of the liquid aiding gravity.

Faster and faster the bodies slid and the pale blood flowed, and faster came the survivors, frosting

the cooling caverns with their own bodies and breath. The lava receded, the rocks cooled, and the ever-strengthening scent of the salt sea lured the wraiths from their shelter like a siren.

* * * * *

The thin rivulets by their feet were suddenly met with a rush of freezing cold liquid, as if a miniature dam had broken somewhere beyond the range of the feeble torchlight and sent this small river rushing down the sloping floor. It was followed by a renewed gust of air that ruffled their hair and clothing and set their noses to stinging with a strange, metallic scent. On the wind came also a strange noise… almost like the shrieks of a storm beating around the eves of a house, oddly misplaced here in this cavern.

The unease that had haunted Freya momentarily at the entrance suddenly came strong upon her once more. In the same instance, three things happened.

Freya said in a rapid, nervous manner, “I think we should…”

And Fratley’s voice overlaid hers, asking, “Do you hear…”

And the wraiths burst upon them.

* * * * *

Everything seemed to explode.

He heard Freya cry out to him in alarm just as the torch he held before him shattered into a thousand embers, the bright flare of light accompanied by the sound of unnerving shrieks and screams from all around him. A brief glimpse of pale white forms flitting past, and then darkness swallowed them up. Bodies collided around and into him, and he instinctively pressed up against the wall to guard his back while striking out in front of him with the remains of the torch and his lance. But as uncountable claws dug into him, he deserted his spot and began running with the flow of bodies, shouting at Freya to do the same.

All was chaos around him for a frantic few minutes as he fought to get ahead of the creatures, slashing at them with his lance and fighting for every foothold that he could possibly gain in the icy, slippery cavern. Just ahead of him and to his left, he caught glimpses of Freya at the very forefront of the pack in the dim light that grew stronger as they neared the entrance. She seemed to be taking rather short leaps, gaining only the bare minimum distance to keep from being swallowed up in the beating

wings, and Fratley saw that she was purposefully staying close in order to beat as many of the creatures down as possible in order to clear the way for him.

Her frantic efforts bore fruit just a few seconds later as Fratley finally fought his way forward and then kept just ahead of the silvery, shrieking wraiths that hounded him. No longer slowed down by wings buffeting him from all sides and claws ripping at his clothes and weapon, he fairly flew down the frozen passageway until he spotted a fork in the cave system. Gambling on the guess that the wraiths would follow the slick trail of ice that he now knew was the blood of their own, he headed for the side passage, shouting for Freya to follow him.

He dug his claws into the rock and ice just before the branching and darted into the darker space, and then whirled around to ask if Freya had taken any serious injury.

She was not there.

Fratley stood stunned for a moment, and then leapt for the opening to the main tunnel once more, but had to jerk back as the wave of wraiths suddenly rushed past, making of themselves an impenetrable wall of wings and limbs. A stray claw struck at him,

tearing his left ear into bloody shreds and wringing from him a startled oath.

The wraiths were flying down the tunnels so quickly that it was only a minute or so before the pack began to thin. Careless of his own safety, Fratley edged out into the main tunnel once more and peered up and down the passageway, beating aside random wraiths in an almost absent manner, the bulk of his concentration being given over to his searching. The mass of creatures blocking the weak light from the entrance soon scattered and were gone, leaving the Dragoon Knight in a surreal stillness after the crazed noise and motion. He turned his head left and right, straining to see in the dimness, and had to stop a moment to wipe away the blood that streamed from his ear down into his eyes.

Blinking blearily, he shook away the blood from his hand and then stopped and stared at the ice-slicked ground. The wraith blood had crystallized somewhat and now refracted the light a thousandfold, making of the floor a glittering, slushy carpet. On that strange footing, the scattered drops of his own blood bloomed like black roses, and right down the center ran a thick dark stripe. Fratley let his bloodied hand fall to his side as he frowned at stared at the inky swath in the ice, and as he

watched, it grew longer… inching its way down the ice as gravity pulled it… glittering a dark red as it reached the sunlight straining into the cavern.

He lunged back up the passage as soon as he recognized the warm, dark blood for what it was, his feet slipping on the uncertain surface and his voice echoing off of the rocky walls as he shouted, “Freya!” The third calling of her name died in his throat as he spied a large shadow from which the blood flowed, as if it were a small lake that fed the red river.

Carefully wrapping his arms around the body lying on the slimy ice, he called her once again, his voice tentative and hushed this time.

“Freya?”

A faint moan reached his ears, and an arm suddenly flailed upwards from the vague shadow under his face to grab clumsily at his sleeve, giving him reference as to how she lay.

Alive.

“Hold on,” he urged in a whisper, and gathered her as carefully as he could in his arms, trying not to disturb her. He wove a quick succession of general, sustaining magics about her as he lifted her, calling

upon spell after spell until he was drained. After making certain that he had her secure, the Dragoon Knight turned and ran back to the opening where there would be light enough to look over her wounds.

He sped down the ice, digging his feet in to slow himself only when he seemed in danger of crashing into one of the walls, and reached the bottom in less than a tenth of the time it had taken for them to climb up. Sliding down onto his knees at the very end, he immediately laid the unconscious Freya down on the nearest snowbank, as a softer and more appropriate sickbed than the frozen blood of their foes, and then shrugged off his pack while raking her over with his eyes.

His hands worked automatically, opening bottles of potions to renew his magical abilities and restore some of the blood she had lost, but his heart seemed to cringe and sink as he catalogued her injuries. Just as on his own body, there were myriad short slashes and jagged tears in both her clothing and her skin. But where his greatest damage was merely a ripped ear, Freya’s worst wound extended from just below her breastbone, down and across her left side to where her ribs ended.

Fratley gripped one of the potions so tightly that the glass shattered in his hands, startling him. Jarred from his horrified triage, he gritted his teeth and set to work determinedly. She would live. She had lost a great amount of blood and the deep wound had damaged her badly but he was capable of stabilizing her.

He would not let this woman die.

A nerve-wracking ten minutes later, the empty, glazed look lifted from Freya's eyes and she finally recognized him once more. Her bloodshot eyes roved in some confusion from the Knight still working busily over her to the bloody snow around her, and then as she tried to lift her head to peer at her wound, Fratley finally noticed her return to the land of the living.

She parted her lips as if to speak, but only a faint whisper of air came out.

"You are gravely injured," Fratley informed her, "but you shall survive."

A frown creased her forehead and she tried again. "Where?" she managed to rasp out.

Guessing that she was disoriented, Fratley said, "We are at the entrance to the cavern. You were

struck down by a wraith without my realizing it, and when the creatures had passed, I returned for you. It is all right, Freya. I found you quickly. You shall heal."

Contrary to his expectations, her frown only deepened, and a purely distressed look came into her eyes. She shook her head as much as her feeble state allowed and said in shallow, broken whispers, "Why… what… are you… doing…"

He met this unanswerable question with yet another healing spell, this one aimed at knitting together new flesh. It was one of seven different spells that he had been casting approximately one minute apart, healing her as completely and quickly as he could without pushing himself into a stroke. While he was so occupied, Freya rolled laboriously onto her right side, propping herself up on one elbow and glaring at him. As Fratley somewhat wearily drank down another restorative drink, she asked, "How long… have you been… tending me here?"

The last word ended on a harsh cough, and Fratley's answer was delayed somewhat as he watched her retch up clots of blood into the already reddened snow by her side. Now that she was

awake, he caught up the cloak he had shed and tried to place it around her shoulders, but she caught one of his wrists and glared up at him.

“Ten minutes, Freya. No more than that,” he finally answered, wondering at her strange insistence and mood. “Now lie down.”

He stared in shock as she actually slapped away his hand in a burst of energy and then ground out one emphatic word before falling into another coughing fit.

“Gem!”

He had forgotten.

Shaking his head to dispel the moment’s surprise and dismay, he took advantage of the injured Knight’s weakened state and simply pushed her back down into the snow, cradled now in his cloak. She was his immediate concern. “Freya,” he said in a soothing tone, but then sighed in exasperation as she struggled back up. “Lie still!” He nearly barked this last out as a command, frustrated by her refusal to be quiet. Didn’t she understand that she was at Death’s door?

He looked into her eyes.

She did.

She was sitting up once more, her entire body trembling with the exertion, and staring him down. She was a seasoned warrior with countless miles of travel under her belt and the blood of thousands of enemies on her lance. With his aimless, memory-less wanderings factored in, it was likely that she actually had the greater field experience than he.

So she knew full well what such a deep abdominal wound meant. She knew also her own body's limits and resources. And she knew that restorative spells would need to be cast upon her body every few moments for several hours at least, and though the frequency could be lessened over the next few days, unceasing vigilance would still be necessary for so dire a wound.

Freya had long ago mastered the necessary spells as part of her novitiate, and there were potions in her knapsack enough to keep her magical abilities up, but they both knew that there was no enchantment nor substance in the world that would allow her the strength and endurance to treat herself of such an injury instead of another. Left alone, Freya would be dead within twenty minutes.

She drew a careful breath and whispered, her voice weak and thin but the force and determination behind them clear. “We’ve Journeyed six months… searched this continent for an entire season… hoping for this one chance. The King has commanded you to find that jewel… you will not… not fail in your duty now. GO!”

He stared down at her for just a moment more, at this pale, bloody, ghastly shade commanding him with such unimagined authority. Was this his Freya, then? The stripling Novice he’d tutored and taught, was she this angry Dragoon, glaring at him with outraged eyes and absolutely daring him to disobey her order? The woman he’d once thought of as overly emotional and perhaps even selfish, was she this desperately wounded and desperately precious person who was now dragging herself upright before his very eyes when she ought not to have even been conscious, and reminding him of his duty to king and kingdom? Such courage! Such strength and unswerving devotion to her duty! The Novice was tutoring the Mentor now, in the ways of a true Knight. Surely there was only one course for him now; to follow the example she set for him.

Closing his eyes to the terrible, awesome sight of her, he nodded once and then jumped up and ran

towards the cavern.

Freya waited, trembling, just until he'd finally disappeared beyond the shadows of the tunnel, and then let loose the coughing spasm she'd been holding back, spilling forth a great gout of blood from her torn lungs. Even as she gripped tighter the pack with its restorative potions, overwhelming pain drew a great darkness over Freya's mind, and she fainted.

* * * * *

Keep going, ignoring the fear clawing at his heart, ignoring the bloody visions of her that menaced his mind's eye, ignoring the voice shouting and demanding that he turn around and save her… save the woman who was even now breathing her last breath and bleeding her last drop of blood onto the rocky soil. Keep going, for it was his duty as a Knight, to fulfill his mission, to complete the Journey, to return to the King with the gemstone that they had searched for and fought for… and that she was dying for. Keep going, because she had told him to, no commanded him to. Commanded him to be a Knight, a Dragoon, the Sir Fratley that she had so long admired and acclaimed… and loved.

He stopped suddenly, his feet slipping slightly on the gore-slicked floor, and looked over his shoulder toward the entrance. His face was twisted into a mask of pain, both at the certainty of Freya's death, and the unfamiliar indecision that tore at him. The Knight turned his shoulder as well as his head then, with achingly uncertain slowness, and it seemed as if his upper body were trying to force his legs to follow it back to the entrance.

A fellow Knight had reminded him of his duty to the King. He had to go on. It was what she wanted… for him to serve the King and not his own interests. It was what he had taught her. He had to put aside his personal concerns and her personal safety in favor of their duty as a Dragoon. The duty they both shared. That was what she wanted…

These thoughts jumbled together in his mind… images of Freya, the king, Cleyra… her voice echoing in his mind, first telling him that she loved him, and then shouting at him to leave her to die… and thoughts of his duty, of himself… the Dragoon, the Mentor, the one she looked up to and honored and loved… she loved him for his sworn loyalty and unswerving dedication, for being the type of absolute Knight who would leave her to die and fulfil his duty, just as she told him to do…

…just as he would have told her to do had it been he that lay dying.

And the image came into his mind then, switching her broken body for his, and his anxious eyes for her clear blue ones. And he heard himself give the same order… to leave him and do her duty and go on to retrieve the gemstone for the King.

All this time, the Dragoon Knight had remained frozen, half turning back, half moving onward, now locked in place as his mind struggled between duty and another Dragoon for the very first time in his remembered life. Suddenly, Fratley blinked, and the vision in his mind's eye vanished. All traces of doubt and hesitation fell from his body in that same instant, and he dug his feet into the icy ground and began running as fast as he could. With his decision made and his mind clear once more, his steps were not hindered by doubt, and did not falter as he sped along the tunnel with his purpose fixed clear in his mind.

6. Fire Shrine to Cleyra

Courage and Strength — Part VI: Fire Shrine to Cleyra

The spell was already half-formed in his mind, but it unraveled as Fratley caught sight of her, face down in a splash of red snow.

“Freya!” he cried, his voice harsh and terrible. Heedless of his own injuries, he crashed to his knees at her side and turned her over, holding her up with one arm and searching desperately for a pulse with his free hand. As his questing fingers found a faint, thready pulse, pale eyelids twitched once and then fluttered beneath his face. He watched her eyes open, and they seemed to fix upon his own face. She drew in a rattling breath through lips parted as if about to speak, and Fratley’s own breath caught in his throat, but she simply sighed. He waited, still holding his breath, still looking into the eyes that weren’t quite looking back at him.

He waited until his lungs burned and then drew in just a faint gasp of air, enough to whisper, “Freya?”

No reply. No response at all, in point of fact. He blinked, and then realized that she hadn't done so since opening her eyes. His hands tightened a bit, tensing as if for battle against a fact that he wasn't ready to face, and then he nearly dropped her as he felt another weak pulse against the fingers he still held to her throat.

Not yet. Not yet and not for years, not for decades if he had any say in the matter. Jolted from his shocked stillness, he worked now at a frantic pace. First a life spell to strengthen the fading ties that bound her to this broken body and air breathed carefully into her lungs. Next, he renewed the string of spells that he had been casting minutes ago… precious minutes that should have never been wasted. A spell to knit together delicate tissues, another to mend the cracks in her ribs, and yet another variation to heal the tears in muscle. A restorative spell to replenish fluid and another for all the blood she had lost, and finally two quickening spells to hasten healing and give aid to her laboring heart.

He allowed himself to breathe when she breathed, and checked her pulse in between each spell. Now and then an ice wraith or two, or sometimes a pack of five or more would come shrieking in and out of

the cavern not twenty feet away from the two Dragoons, but neither side paid any heed to the other, both intent on the continuation of their lives and way of living. As the minutes ticked by, more and more of the wraiths that had swarmed out towards the nearest shore came winging by, anxious it seemed to regain the safety of their cavern before the lava locked them out and yet reluctant to leave their brief taste of open air.

At least a half hour passed, and with Freya's life now reasonably secure, Fratley spared a moment's thought for their joint safety from the wraiths that had so nearly sent one of them to the grave. Yet after a careful look around, the Dragoon simply sat more comfortably near Freya and did not move. The dangerous creatures were gathering near the cavern entrance, flying in tight circles and swirls. They were packed together in such numbers that it seemed a miracle that they did not constantly crash into one another, but ages and generations of living in cramped confinement had fostered a subtle body language and constant awareness of each other, so that the individual clusters and groups seemed to fly in patterns drawn by one mind. Now and again, one would cling with sharp claws to a boulder or outcropping and fix a beady eye on Fratley or Freya,

tilting its head as if trying to remember if these two had been there last year. But other than these brief, curious examinations, none of the wraiths showed any signs of interest in the two strangers, malicious or otherwise. The tearing, biting, clawing fury of the tunnels had simply been a product of the wraiths' need to gain the outside, and hadn't been an attack at all.

And yet… Fratley watched the tunnel entrance and noted the wraiths that still flew in and out, as if enjoying the rare freedom of being able to choose to return and depart again as they wished. The book that had led the Dragoon Knights to this place had mentioned one hour in which one might venture deep into the volcano in relative safety. Though the wraiths might not have any interest in outsiders as either prey or foes, still their clawed wings and single-minded flight made the tunnel a death trap.

He turned most of his attention back to his patient, renewing the string of healing spells. Just as the last sparkles of light faded into Freya's body, a thundering rush of a thousand wings startled Fratley to his feet, lance automatically in his hand and his eyes darting this way and that. In amazement, the Knight watched as every single wraith in sight suddenly rushed upwards to form a swirling cloud of

pale leathery wings and then funneled into the tunnel. Within a matter of five minutes, the mountainside had been cleared, with nothing but Freya's blood as proof that there had ever been a single ice wraith about.

The Knight stared at the suddenly empty landscape for a while, and then gave a small shrug and went about setting up a tent in which to shelter Freya more properly, now that it seemed safe to move her. It was a matter of moments to erect the small shelter under a protective overhang of rock, and another minute in which to carefully pick his way over to the tent with Freya cradled carefully in his arms. He wove another series of spells over her and then looked about him, as if the silence was now even more unnerving than the presence of the wraiths.

Fratley watched Freya breathe for a minute and then let his eyes rove absently over their surroundings, thinking over the book that had led them to the Fire Shrine. One last glance at the peacefully slumbering form tucked away in their tent, and the Dragoon stood up, lance in hand.

* * * * *

She woke up suddenly, without any preamble of light striking her closed lids in a red haze, or of sensations and sounds slowly intruding through the thick curtain of unconsciousness. Freya simply opened her eyes and was awake.

The first thing she saw was a bright, watery light streaming in through the open flaps of the tent she had apparently been sleeping in, and Sir Fratley standing guard just outside. Her head felt light, as if she were a bit detached from her usual world, and she attempted to sit up that she might shake her head and look around a bit, and perhaps orient herself better. But her attempt at simply hauling herself upright was interrupted by a sharp stab of pain that seemed to paralyse her left side all the way up to her shoulder, and Freya moaned and fell back onto her blanket. The light filtering into the tent shifted a bit, and Sir Fratley's face was soon peering in at her. He sighed but said nothing, as if not quite surprised that she had tried to get up as soon as she was awake, as if nothing had happened.

As if she'd never been injured.

The events leading up to her loss of consciousness suddenly rushed back at her, and Freya fought with a brief disorientation as she tried

to tie her last waking memories with her awakening in this tent. Sir Fratley was seated by her side now, eyes closed and head bent and he wove a spell around her. She felt some of the pain fade, but then frowned as her mind continued to work.

“You…” she said in a sleep-rough voice, and then paused to clear her throat. “You came back for me.”

In most circumstances, and with most women, this would have been a statement of joy and of the subtle triumphs of the gentler sex, but then again, Freya was quite unique. A frown still creased her brow, and pain of a different sort than the kind her wounds gave her was evident in her eyes. The man hovering over her gave her a small, lopsided smile, the usually happy expression an ill fit over the lines of worry on his face.

“It occurred to me that you were not overfond of watching me turn and walk away from you,” Fratley said, his sober tone making his flippant answer less so.

Freya listened to his attempt at humor and his serious manner but could scarcely give them any weight, with this one thought growing more and more clear in her mind; that she had come between him and his duty. Suddenly wanting to be free of the

confining blanket, she made a second, more careful attempt to rise from her makeshift bed. With a supportive arm lent to her by Sir Fratley, soon she was sitting up, and after a few deep breaths in which to try and tamp down the deep ache in her side, she shook her head and said softly, “You should not have turned back. You should have let me die. You would have gained the gem as was your duty and Cleyra would be safe behind the storm as it should. I would live on in your memory, and it would have been enough and more.”

At her side, Fratley let out a brief sigh and then countered, “And why should I have gone on, when the gemstone would wait patiently for me and safe inside the mountain and you had only a few minutes left?”

“Because I’m a burden to you!” Freya cried, her voice strained. She looked up at him, her pale blue eyes bright with pain, upset with him and yet even more upset at herself. “I should have never told you I loved you, for now it is ever in your mind, whether you know it or not, and cold though everyone might think you I know better, and you have and will again in your kindness and caring look past your duty in order to keep me from hurt and harm. Some day you will be killed by your concern for me, and it will

have been better for me if I had never been born at all than to be the cause of your death!”

She seemed to plead with him to understand, and yet to agree with her would have meant that he would affirm that her life was worthless when compared to his duty. But there was duty, and then there was duty. Although he remained seated, Fratley drew himself up as best he could and replied sternly, “All die, Freya, and every Dragoon has taken oath to lay down their lives for one another. How is it different should I die for you rather than for some other of our order?” She looked back at him with the same expression yet on her face, not understanding this fine difference, this new weighing of values in his life. Exasperation crept into his voice as he continued. This sentimental Dragoon… now out of all the times they had spoken was she clinging to the legalistic view of their order, and the older Knight found himself arguing with the more passionate words that she would have usually used.

“No, and it is different, for I would gladly die in your stead out of more than loyalty. You would have my life, Freya, for affection as well, just as I know that you would count it an honor and priviledge to take my place in death’s arms. You will lose me

someday, Freya, to death, and what better could I hope for than to die in battle, and in saving you as well?”

She shook her head and argued with him further. “And while you live, and hope for that great death, I am yet dragging you down. Were the gem only attainable this once in a lifetime, would you have pressed on, leaving me to my end?”

He glared at her, but she had not been for years that fragile-looking Novice, quailing before his reputation and imposing presence. To his silence she insisted, “Would you?”

Instead of answering, he mimicked her question back at her. “Would you?”

She understood him immediately, but he deliberately took her reluctance to answer as incomprehension, and clarified. “Would you have left me? Knowing that I would die, and needlessly, just for a stone that would still be there next year, and the year after that? Knowing that you would trade haste for my life, when duty did not call with such urgency that such sacrifices were necessary?”

She simply returned his earlier glare, silently but clearly stating that she found this reversal of

questions manifestly unfair. He met her eyes more calmly and added, “I wager that you would not have even given ear to my orders, much less gotten up at all to walk away, nor given more than a fleeting thought to the gemstone. And that is not disobedient, nor undutiful, nor at all weak.”

When she would have answered, he held up a hand to forestall any further speech. “No more for today, Lady Freya. You are tired out from your injuries. Sleep now.”

His more formal tone of voice and use of her title might have served adequately in ending the conversation, but Fratley felt unaccountably tired and worn and little given to taking chances. Before she could protest, he cast a quick spell, and caught her in his arms as she slumped over, fast asleep.

* * * * *

She snapped wide awake, and this time found herself lying in a spacious bunk set deep into a niche in a wall, paneled with polished wood and studded with bright brass nails. Instead of the thin blankets that they had packed for the Journey, there were extravagantly embroidered sheets and comforters piled on top of her from neck to toes, and as she craned her head to look about her, she found that she

was absolutely surrounded by downy pillows, all with the crest of the Alexandrian royal house embroidered on it in gold thread. The only thing that she could tie into her last awakening was that Sir Fratley was still close by. But rather than standing guard outside their tent, he was now seated at a table in the middle of what looked to be an excruciatingly expensive airship cabin, busily writing in the book they had liberated from the Daguerro archives.

“Sir Fratley?” she ventured, and the thin scratching of pen on paper halted immediately. After quickly wiping off his pen and capping the inkwell, he brought the tattered book over to her along with a chair. As he strode over, Freya made a few tentative attempts to push herself up from the oversoft bedding without smothering herself. She succeeded after a few moments, and was pleased as well as a bit confused to note that her injury hardly pained her at all. Such a state should only have been possible after at least a week of rest and recovery.

Sir Fratley set his chair down by the bed and then settled into it. “It appears,” he began, tapping the book in his hand, “that we misinterpreted a key passage in this tome. Or perhaps more specific information could have been found in the missing pages.” Freya blinked at him, both at his words and

at his easy tone, as if their brief argument of — a few hours ago? — had never even occurred. Freya noted again the cabin, with the fleecy white clouds flying past the portholes. Along with a sense that she had been asleep for far longer than one sleep spell allowed, there was the puzzle of how in the world she had gone from the frozen wasteland of the Fire Shrine to this airship.

Fratley noted her vague confusion and sat back in his chair. “You have a dozen questions, at least,” he noted. “Ask them in what order you wish, and sooner or later we shall come to the matter of this book.”

“How have we come to be on this airship?” she asked, simply blurting out the question that rose first to the surface of her mind.

Her companion nodded and replied immediately, “This will also answer, ‘how long have I been asleep?’ Forgive me, Freya, but I’ve kept you sleeping for five days.” To her wide eyes and loosed jaw he actually smiled and said, “You need to heal, and I wanted to conserve my strength in case you awoke in the mood for another verbal battle.”

This pointed remark set Freya blushing to the tips of her ears, but Sir Fratley seemed not to notice and

continued his answering. “Your friend, Queen Alexandros, had been on a state visit to Lindblum to see her friends and relatives there. A loyal and caring friend indeed, for she grew anxious over confused reports that we had disappeared from Daguerro and intended to lay siege to the entire continent to the North. She sent not only her own ship but five of Regent Cid’s to the Forgotten Continent, there to search us out from the air, with orders from her Majesty’s very hand that the crew should lend us what assistance we asked.

They found us the day after I had spelled you to your long rest, and for that I am heartily thankful, not because you are so over heavy, but because flying would be less jarring to your injuries than being carried ’cross mountains and valleys all the way to Daguerro. We are now headed north to Cleyra and should, in fact, reach it this very afternoon.”

Freya had by this time fought down her embarassment and assimilated all of the new information. Nodding at the book still in Sir Fratley’s hand, she asked next, “And what of this misinterpreted passage that you mentioned? Was the Fire Shrine not our destination after all?”

“It was the place, assuredly,” Fratley replied, “but I wish that we had known about the wraiths. The hour of safety in which to do our treasure hunting did not begin as soon as the blood of the wraiths began to cool the tunnel, as we found to our peril. Nor did it begin with their departure from the tunnels.”

Tapping the cover of the worn and tattered book with one finger, he continued, “As I have now noted in this journal, the tunnels are only safe once all of the wraiths have returned to their hidden caverns. The corridors remain cool from their passing for a while, and the danger from the wraiths themselves is finally past.”

He cast the book aside, onto a sturdy side table where it settled comfortably amidst the clutter of several boxes and pouches already there, and then picked up one intricately carved wooden box. Setting it on the bed next to Freya, he said, “While you were asleep, I went in after the wraiths as they raced back to their home, to retrieve your lance which I had left behind in my haste to treat you of your wounds. I also found this some way further along the passage, and brought it back, thinking that you might find it intruiging.”

Freya lifted the lid of the container and then immediately dropped it, crying out, “My God!”

“Such language, Lady Freya,” Fratley chided, and then asked, “Do you think it will suit?”

The blood red stone nestled in the silk-lined box was still in its raw form, with thick veins and clumps of mythril still clinging to it, but at first glance it was apparent that even after it was cut down and polished the thing would still be half again as large as an apple.

“I took the liberty of bending my mind towards the thing, to be sure that it indeed held power,” the older Dragoon said, and then added ruefully, “The resultant storm nearly sent the airship into a mountain, and I fear I am no longer in the captain’s good graces.”

Seeing that his companion was still utterly entraced by the glittering stone, Fratley took the opportunity to congratulate themselves. “The Journey was a success after all, Lady Freya. Well done.”

With a bit of effort, she tore her eyes away from the treasure before her and then looked up at Sir Fratley. She nodded at him with a small smile, and

then sat looking at him for a while, thinking to herself about all that had happened in the past months, and especially the past week. Now that all was over, with the Journey nearly complete and the both of them relatively safe and sound, she found that after all, her anguish over her injury and its results were but scattered leaves to be left for the wind to blow away. Tired and weak and worried… she had simply overreacted.

It was true that if their positions had been reversed, she likely would not have left Sir Fratley to die, even had the King suddenly appeared and commanded her so. And perhaps she had slipped back a little, into the ways of her novitiate. Wanting to fulfil Sir Fratley's expectations of her, both real and imagined, by being all that one could desire or expect in a Dragoon Knight. Freya wondered how she might word an apology to him for her outburst when Sir Fratley spoke instead.

"And if you are wondering as you watch me, whether this gem acts as a soothing salve to my conscience, then the answer is no, because I do not have need of such a thing. Were we flying homeward without any prize except for that journal and the knowledge it contains, I would still be satisfied with the results. The path I chose brings me

back to Burmecia with you still alive and at my side, and I do not regret any part of the Journey that ends so."

Freya shook her head and began to protest, "No, I was not going to say…" but just then a knock sounded at the cabin's door.

A sailor came in at Sir Fratley's call to enter, and then reported in a brisk manner, "You asked that I inform you when we crossed the border into Burmecia, Sir Knight. Just wanted to let you know, Sir, that we have, and should land by Cleyra in just another hour." With that, he tipped his hat at them both and bowed his way out.

Fratley replaced the lid to the box, put it back onto the side table, and then said, "Well, now that we are technically in Burmecia once more and you are cheered by the success of our Journey, I have something to ask."

Freya wondered what location had to do with anything, and gave a rueful inner laugh at once more finding herself with no idea where Sir Fratley's words had sprung from, nor where they were leading. Still in a bit of shock from her initial look at the gemstone he had found, she bantered with a light smile, "Ask away, Sir Knight."

He did not return the smile, but instead leaned forward in his chair, with his elbows resting on his knees and his hand clasped as if he were intent over weighty matters at a conference table. Brown eyes looked steadily and with all seriousness at Freya, and he asked, “Do you despise me now?”

Freya stared back at him, caught completely off guard by the question, and not understanding it at all. “What?” she asked incredulously, with an almost offended tone in her voice, as if the suggestion that she should feel such a thing toward him was an undeserved insult.

“From what I have gathered, you quite nearly worshipped me during your novitiate,” Fratley said. “And you’ve made clear how you care for me. But for all the things you’ve told me, I have no idea how much of your admiration and affection are based upon this idea you have of me as this cool, uncompromising Knight, or whether your opinion of me is formed upon… other things that I can not explain.”

He waved one hand vaguely in the air as if half-heartedly grasping for a formless definition, and then added, “It is not so simple a thing for me anymore, to say that my duty is paramount. The

form that duty takes — and the results of my choices — now govern my actions, rather than the plain and too-simple list of priorities that were drilled into me so long ago. Perhaps this Ice-hearted Sir Fratley that I was would have made the better Dragoon, but I find the one I am now to be a better person, and I would not regret this change, except that perhaps I have fallen in your eyes. If so, tell me."

Aghast that her words should be taken to mean such things, Freya hurried to reply, her words tumbling out over each other in a rush. "No, and never. You were called ice-hearted but you never were in fact. I told you before we departed Cleyra that you had not changed in your years of absence, and that still holds. I only… I did not expect you to return for me, as I would have for you, because…"

Her speech slowed, and she grimaced at having talked herself into an uncomfortable corner, but then gamely went on, having always given him honesty, at least. "Because I would have chosen to turn aside from my duty for the reason that I could not have born your death… not as easily as I thought you might have withstood mine. But you did come back, and I have some lingering doubts as to whether my heart is yet a burden or blessing to you…"

Before her, Sir Fratley suddenly straightened up in his chair, and Freya cut off her words, wondering suddenly if he desired the conversation to end. But he only shook his head briefly and then asked quietly, “And this love that you fear is a nuisance to me… if it is undiminished as you say, does it now burden you? Would you, if possible, wipe your heart clear of me, as my mind was of you?”

She immediately started to shake her head no, but he went on as if not expecting — or needing — her to answer. “Perhaps it is well that you let me leave Burmecia without speaking your heart and mind all those years ago. For whatever took my memory might well have taken yours as well, and what tragedy if there were neither you nor I to recall one to the other.”

Freya frowned at the thought and mused over it for a moment. Then, casting her eyes down, she responded in a low voice as if confessing something to be ashamed of. “No matter if my memory had been lost, nor no matter if it is lost time upon time, I would always love you once we met again,” she murmured.

Reaching over to take one of her hands in his, Fratley waited patiently until she raised her head to

meet his gaze. After only a moment, her clear blue eyes were lifted to his face once more.

Smiling gently at her, he replied, “As I would you.”

“…Freya?”

“Freya,” Fratley repeated, more insistently, and she blinked and seemed to focus directly upon him once more. “What are you thinking of, that you look at me so strangely?”

“I was wondering… what you meant,” she said rather blankly. Her heart seemed to have stopped, and she wondered how many more shocks she could take after her injury before passing out entirely.

Her other hand was taken up as well, and both held carfully between Fratley’s own. Leaning forward again, he said in quiet, steady tone, “The night before we started this journey you knelt in the sands at the foot of Cleyra and told me something you’d waited eight years to say. I thought to say this to you at the same place, but I find the idea of testing your patience further to be intolerable.”

He gripped both of her hands tight, almost crushing her fingers, but she felt it not at all as she listened to him speak.

“I love thee, Freya.”

He watched her struggle to blink away tears and draw in steady breaths, and felt a pang that this woman had suffered so much at his hand. Pressing the fingers of one hand against the small lump on his vest where Freya’s Novice medal still lay pinned, he said, “And I loved you before, and promise to love you always. Forgive me Freya, for the years that I did not tell you so.”

She rubbed at her eyes in an appealingly childish manner for one of her years, nodded until he had to laugh at her, and then suddenly leaned forward and threw her arms around him, sending pillows tumbling to the floor every which way.

A bit of alarm flitted through Sir Fratley’d mind that she could very well be pulling at her wound by clinging to him so, but he firmly ignored it and instead allowed himself the pleasure of doing absolutely nothing but enjoying the moment. He put his arms around Freya quite carefuly at first, mindful of her injuries, but she tightened her own limbs around his neck rather pointedly. And so, reminding himself that this woman of all women was most certainly not made of glass, Fratley gathered her

close, dragging her nearly entirely off the bed and onto his knees, and held her tight.

About a minute into the moment, he gradually began to note that there was not a single glimmer of discomfort or embarassment to be found in the very proper and formal Sir Fratley at this unabashed display of affection. He stared at some random spot on the wall across from him and examined his thoughts and feelings rather than his actions for some time, and then closed his eyes, smiling. He felt happy… he felt whole… and he felt as if he had finally returned after a journey of more than the past eight months.

He come back to Burmecia and his duties as a Dragoon Knight over two years ago, but that had been a simple matter of location and vocation. Now, he had finally come home… to Freya.

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